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Dynamics of engagement among youth in Arab Mediterranean countries

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ABSTRACT

Faced with the general period of political demobilisation since 2011, there is a need to look beyond the manifest forms of political participation and to better understand the dynamics of engagement among today's Arab Mediterranean youth. In this article, we inquire into the life experiences of young people and, especially, explore the agentic dimensions of their apparent disengagement. What societal processes shape their negative attitudes toward engaging in public political life? What prospects are there for further politicisation of youth in the post-2011 era? In order to address these questions, we adopt a processual view of engagement, indicating that young people's agencies are geared towards the goals of livelihood, employment, and attaining personal advancement and markers of social adulthood. These in turn represent spheres of life that may aggregate instances of felt injustices and thresholds of politicisation processes.

KEYWORDS Young people; political engagement; disengagement; demobilisation; Arab Mediterranean countries

Introduction

In 2011, as soon as the popular uprisings erupted in Tunisia, Egypt and beyond, the notion of youth gained much currency in the narratives of the so-called Arab Spring. Young people in the region were often put forward as the main agents of social and political change, and invested with high hopes as well as concerns by decision-makers, policy analysts, and researchers alike. Some would observe larger historical processes by which hitherto silenced and sidelined youth would reclaim their due role in society, appearing now as citizens, and not mere subjects as before, reclaiming their role in the making of their collective futures (Alexander 2011; Khalaf and Saad-Khalaf 2011). Others were less

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enthusiastic about the hype around 'youth', pointing to more long-term processes of contentious politics (El-Mahdi 2011; Beinin 2012). In retrospect, the early optimism of democratic transitions in the region was unfounded. Five years on, Syria, Libya and Yemen have gone into downward spirals of violence, and armed insurgences have challenged the realisation of democratic reforms in Tunisia and Egypt. Young people face growing suppression of rights of expression and assembly in the wake of an internally waged 'war on terror' against armed Islamist militants. Despite the revolutionary hopes and aspirations, young people (some two-thirds of the population of Arab Mediterranean countries population are under 30 years of age) are generally excluded from a fair share of the economic progress over recent decades, producing patterns of rising inequality and marginalisation. In global terms, the share of young people 'not in education, employment or training' (NEET) is nowhere higher than in the Middle East and North Africa, a predicament that especially concerns young women (OECD 2015, 10). High levels of youth unemployment and economic hardships also imply more restricted access to housing and delays in marriage, pushing scores of youth into, or a prolonged period of precarious adolescence, whereby they face severe obstacles in making the necessary transitions towards the roles and responsibilities commonly attached to social adulthood (Honwana 2012). This trend, coupled with socioeconomic pressures to earn a living and to establish a family, potentially marginalises young men and women further, disenabling them from fully participating in public life in the ways they feel they deserve (Assaad, Binzel, and Gadallah 2010; Herrera 2010).

Despite the peak of youth activism in the wake of 2011s popular uprisings, it is evident that in the mid-2010s the large majority of young people do not engage in public life through formal avenues of political participation such as voting, political parties, or civil society organisations. The situation conspicuously resembles that of the pre-2011 period (Herrera and Bayat 2010; Sika 2012). Moreover, as we shall discuss below, levels of trust in public political life per se run low among them. The securitisation of public life, coupled with the state discourses of providing stability and socioeconomic progress at the expense of political rights and freedoms, represents today's norm. Although the post-2011 period witnessed the emergence of numerous youth initiatives in the realms of politics, culture and social service delivery, the preoccupations of today's youth are more geared towards the goals of livelihood, employment and personal advancement. Some put their daily efforts into studying, finding a job or building a career, others engage in leisure and courtship, while others seek to migrate and find better life chances abroad (Salhi 2012). Some have been radicalised into armed Islamist movements in their own countries or in the ranks of Islamic State in Syria and Iraq, suggesting the emergence of regional interlinkages between youth radicalisation and marginalisation.

Faced with the general period of political demobilisation since 2011, there is a need to look beyond the manifest forms of political participation and to better understand the contexts and modes of personal engagements among the Arab Mediterranean youth today (Alhamad 2008; Lust-Okar and Zerhouni 2008). In this article we inquire into the life experiences of young people and, especially, explore the agentic dimensions of their apparent disengagement. What societal processes shape their negative attitudes toward participation in public political life? What prospects are there for the politicisation of youth in the post-2011 era? In order to address these questions, we adopt a processual view of engagement among young people and thus do not regard the dualisms of engagement/disengagement or politicisation/depolicitisation as references to stable conditions but, rather, as interstitial stages in their life courses. In this view, young people pass from engagement to disengagement and from politicisation to depolicitisation – and vice versa – both individually and collectively at different times of their life trajectories. Thus, in contrast to manifest forms of political participation – such as protesting, voting and party politics – our special interest is to analyse the dynamics of latent engagements and how these may trigger more protracted forms of collective action among the young. Our intention is also to question the normative dualism of ‘passive’ and ‘active’ youth that often surfaces in public and scholarly debates on youth political engagement.

In this vein, we first explain the methodological underpinnings of this article and then examine the agentic side of disengagement and discuss the ways in which high-level political demands have given way to more subtle, everyday concerns. We approach this through the notions of aspect politics (Palonen 1988; Linjakumpu 2007) and active disengagement (Ekman and Amnå 2012) showing that disengagement from political processes runs in parallel with young people’s preoccupation with issues that are more directly associated with their personal life trajectories. In the third part, we discuss young people’s current concerns and the potential pathways through which youth politicisation and political engagements may materialise, taking our cue from the view that ‘avoiding politics’ (Eliasoph 1998) does not necessarily mean renouncing the political. Before concluding remarks, the fourth part reflects on young people’s livelihood considerations in which the dynamics of engagement and politicisation unfold.

On methodological approaches

This paper draws on research material collected for a wider EU-funded research consortium project entitled ‘SAHWA: Researching Arab Mediterranean Youth – Towards a New Social Contract’ (www.sahwa.eu), which explores the condition of young people in post-2011 Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon. The SAHWA project adopted a mixed-methods approach,

whereby qualitative and quantitative data were gathered on the field by local research teams and partner institutions in the five countries between March 2015 and January 2016. Within this framework, our task has been to focus on the multiple dimensions and complexities of youth engagement in these Arab Mediterranean countries. To do so, we have conducted a meta-analysis based on the qualitative materials of the SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork (2015) that include five national case studies, 25 focus group discussions, 23 life stories, 11 focused ethnographic texts, ten narrative interviews, and one additional personal interview, which we had at our disposal at the time of writing. For the purposes of this article, the national research teams also provided us with additional information on the current situation of youth policies in their respective countries. The quantitative material consists of the SAHWA Youth Survey 2016 ($n = 5.970$) conducted by national partner organisations in Tunisia, Egypt, and Lebanon.

Due to its range, the available research material proved an invaluable source of information although its quality and levels of empirical detail showed considerable variation. We carefully reflected on the limitations and consistencies in this vast body of material to reach a balanced analysis of what emerges as key dynamics of engagement among the young respondents. We had prior research experience in the respective countries and divided the materials accordingly. Upon agreement on the main analytical avenues, we further studied the SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork material through content analysis, whereby we paid special attention to the forms, opinions and experiences of political engagement among the respondents. It involved our collective efforts to transcend the analyses of single ethnographic accounts and move towards meta-ethnographic synthesis through examining the emerging analogies in the research materials (Noblit and Hare 1988, 13; Harinen et al. 2015). As regards the quantitative data, the SAHWA Youth Survey 2016 allowed us to determine statistically robust correlations that hold across all countries and to see certain national differences in youth attitudes and behaviour.¹ Although the survey was conducted with respondents aged between 15 and 29 years, our approach to 'youth' refers also to a culturally specific life stage, or 'social age' (Clark-Kazak 2009), that contains multiple transitions from childhood and schooling toward more autonomous roles and responsibilities of adulthood, including employment, family and reproduction.

In this sense, youth is considered as a relational concept that is shaped by the culturally informed markers of adulthood (Wyn and White 1997). We are aware that this approach does not fully overlap with the age-cohort framing adopted in the SAHWA project. Nonetheless, adopting a 'sociological gaze' on what youthfulness may be has enabled a broader, more insightful reading of the material at our disposal. In particular, it has allowed us to identify the difficulties expressed by many participants to keep up with the

normative transitions (studies, employment, housing, marriage) that continue to represent the ideal sequences of entering adulthood in their respective societies. This disjunction between the social expectations and the realities of their everyday lives plays a part in the ways young people pursue meaningful societal roles. In this regard, collective reflection on this diverse data has allowed us to trace different dimensions of (dis)engagement, and to examine the dynamism and processes that shape young people's participation in public life (see also: Grimm and Pilkington 2015, 207, 226). The analysis of this diverse material was discussed with the researchers who conducted the fieldwork and they provided additional input to the subjects discussed in this paper.

'When I hear "politics", I escape': mapping disengagement as agency

Since the 2011 uprisings, state leadership in these five countries has repeatedly underlined the importance of involving young people in parliamentary processes and public decision-making. The data suggest that the general reception among the youth to these calls has been somewhat contradictory. Zidane (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Algeria: Life Story 8, 7), an unemployed young Algerian man from Akbou near Bejaia City, says that he does not understand politics in the first place and, for him, even the official name of his home country, the 'Algerian People's Democratic Republic' is merely an empty slogan. He does not personally participate in public activities that are organised by political parties or civil society organisations but still follows the regional news and, in particular, the ongoing events in Tunisia and Egypt. Like many of his peers, he was surprised by the rapid popular uprisings in 2011 and their aftermath, but confesses that he is not too enthusiastic about the so-called 'Arab Spring'. In his words: 'Arab countries are rich but their people are poor. In Algeria, we already had our political and social uprising [in the 1990s]. Now we want stability'. Bechir, another young Algerian man from the small village of Fethoune near Bejaia and Tizi Ouzou (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Algeria: Focus Group 5, 7), polemically banters that his general approach to even discussing politics is: 'Whenever I hear "politics", I escape'. At the same time, in Morocco, Abdou, a young man who participated in a focus group discussion cast doubt on the public calls for youth empowerment, pointing to the problematic social interface official, state-led empowerment initiatives may have with the masses of the young population:

Everyone talks about integration or the involvement of young people in decision making, but how many young people are actually involved in these decisions? Isn't this category of youth exploited in the production of certain policies? Regarding the forms of participation, we can observe some of them along the axis of Kenitra, Marrakech until Agadir. But there are other regions where

young people are not involved at all and they choose non-involvement. Is it a political choice? [...] They choose to stay at the coffee corner, smoking quietly, watching the sea, they have other concerns. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Morocco: Focus Group 3, 5)

These personal reflections on the relevance of politics by youths in Algeria and Morocco echo the diverse and not always unproblematic approaches to the popular uprisings and revolutionary upheavals in the region. Neither country witnessed rapid political changes in comparison with Tunisia and Egypt, for instance, bearing witness to the fact that the five countries under study represent diverse political heritages and social histories both before and after the 2011 popular uprisings. Our emphasis on youth disengagement here is thus not to negate the fact that political turbulence has occurred since 2011, and that youth have often played important roles therein. In Tunisia and Egypt, Islamists won a majority in the first post-2011 parliamentary elections, although their power has now been replaced: in Egypt through a popular movement and military takeover in 2013 and in Tunisia by the electoral victory of a broad-based coalition in 2014. Both countries have witnessed high levels of political violence and turbulence. In Lebanon, the recent years of turmoil, the long absence of the presidency, and the inactive government due to the political deadlock have led to a wide sense of distrust in public institutions. Young people have, however, continuously mobilised in grass-roots movements to address political, social or environmental issues. In Morocco, the February 20th protest movement emerged into public life in 2011 and managed to promote legislative reforms that were approved in a national referendum. Still, according to the young respondents, very little on the ground has changed in the country. Algeria, too, witnessed sporadic protest movements and activities in the wake of the 2011 popular uprisings but, as Zidane suggested above, the 1990s civil war between armed Islamists and the military provided a forceful reminder for many that social turbulence may easily lead to years of protracted violence. Despite this turbulence, in the five countries under study our data indicates that the large majority of young people have not participated in public political activities in the mid-2010s.²

The question posed by Abdou, the young Moroccan above, is highly relevant to our discussion and could be rephrased as follows: 'Is non-involvement a political choice?' In other words, the figure of young men passing time in cafés or on the streets, or hanging about outside watching the sea and, to start with, having other concerns far from politics, provides a certain sense of daily life and activities that are shared by scores of young people in Arab Mediterranean countries. But does their disengagement from public political life necessarily mean that they remain apathetic about their societies? Does disengagement imply being inactive in other areas of everyday life? As Asef Bayat has argued, many marginalised groups, such as the poor, the young and women, 'do not sit around passively obeying the diktats of their

police states, nor did they tie their luck to the verdict of destiny', continuing: 'rather, they were always engaged, albeit in mostly dispersed and disparate struggles in the immediate domains of their everyday life – in the neighbourhoods, places of work, street corners, courthouses, communities, and in the private realms of taste, personal freedom, and preserving dignity' (Bayat 2013, x–xi).

Before elaborating further on the issue of multiple engagements, it is first necessary to map out some of the qualitative differences and nuances that are at times lumped together under the rubric of political engagement. We adopt a wide understanding of politics as 'aspect politics' (Linjakumpu 2007, 12–14; Palonen 1988, 19) whereby politics is oriented toward, but not exclusive of, individual and collective action. In this light, any given issue, event or opinion in social life can be politicised – through debate and antagonistic positions – and articulated to a wider set of demands and grievances. This approach differs from the more 'sectoral view on politics' as an institutional field which consists of politicians, political parties, municipal councils, parliamentary processes and other formal organisations in public political life.

In addition, youth researchers Ekman and Amnå (2012) provide a typology of both manifest and latent forms of political participation that is useful for our discussion. By manifest political participation, they refer to direct forms of public political engagement such as voting, political party membership, protest activities and awareness campaigning in public life. Latent participation, for its part, is less direct and includes more informal activities, civic engagement and social involvement at the everyday level beyond formal organisations. The latter forms of political engagement were prevalent in authoritarian settings in the Middle East and North Africa long before the 2011 uprisings (Alhamad 2008; Lust-Okar and Zerhouni 2008; Singerman 1997).

In our discussion, however, it is useful to consider the agentic dimensions of disengagement which, in Ekman and Amnå's terms, can be considered as an indirect (or latent) form of political participation (Ekman and Amnå 2012). In this context, they propose to differentiate between passive and active forms of disengagement. While passive disengagement implies the lack of interest and relatedness to current affairs at individual and collective levels, active disengagement refers more to purposeful activities to avoid politics and political discussions; this qualitative difference cannot be downplayed since while the former stems from lack of interest, the latter is more a matter of disillusionment or even disgust. In the lives of young people, it may refer to a variety of moments and activities whereby they seek, if not to 'escape', then at least to avoid and keep away from anything related to public and official realms of political life. The active disengagement does not necessarily imply that young people are indifferent towards current affairs, or do not have personal or collective stances on topical political,

economic and social issues in their societies and globally. This view corresponds with the analysis of our research material which points to somewhat widespread negative attitudes that are coupled with simultaneous disdain and lack of trust among young respondents against formal political institutions in their respective countries. This stance is clearly described in the National Case Study from Tunisia:

The reading of the data collected reveals disenchantment with regard to politics. Several expressions put forward by our interviewees describe young people's loss of confidence in politics. The rhetoric of non-credibility recurs relatively frequently in the discourse on political life in the transitional context. This rhetoric is built around observations of the ambiguity of politics, as may be seen through the statements made by 'Farid': 'I don't understand anything in politics, we live, we may say, in a desert, we follow a path whose end we ignore'. Also they described the hypocrisy of the political world, as 'Said' says: 'Now, politics is lies, personal interests ... not to speak of promises. They are all liars ... Though I have my ideological orientation ... believe me they are all liars. The experience of 2008 taught us, trained us. The people you see on the TV, the political men ... we need to start over'. On another level, the young people consider that 'our politics' is dictated from abroad ('Sami' & 'Karim'). These different representations of politics express young people's disinterest in a politics they consider to be 'a headache' ('Smail'). (National case study Tunisia, SAHWA Project, 19)

This excerpt echoes the general trend in the data, underlining that one of the main features of disengagement among young respondents is that they commonly cultivate a negative and state-centred view of politics. While acknowledging the different social histories of each country, there are several registers through which young respondents articulate their negative attitudes towards public political life in general. Among the most common perception of sectoral politics is that it represents an exclusive domain where groups and individuals seek personal benefits at the cost of the common good, or what is best for society as a whole. This view thus reduces 'politics' to a game in which different actors pursue their own interests at the expense of social justice, rule of law, and equal distribution of resources, and are pressured to compromise their values and ideals, and consequently risk becoming corrupted in one way or another. Moreover, politics is characterised as a deliberative domain where ideological rhetoric and statements prevail, and where lofty goals and promises are made, but as a rule these rarely lead to tangible changes in everyday life.

In short, young respondents consider politics to be a sphere of society that can hardly be influenced by lay citizens on their own. Although the 2011 uprisings witnessed rapid political upheavals through which scores of young people engaged in public debate, and different forms of manifest and latent political participation, the rekindled interest in politics of the period has gradually given way to other considerations. While the large majority of young people in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt and Lebanon do not

involve themselves in public politics or voluntary activities, they are by no means passive in other areas of their everyday lives, such as studies, taking up courses, working, finding work, and so on. Often, these more personal goals work against the option of engaging in civil society organisations, the majority of which are in the field of social service delivery and charity work. For Salwa, a young woman from southern Egypt, engaging with 'Resala' – a major charity organisation in Egypt – during university gave her experience of engaging in philanthropy and 'doing good' for society as a whole:

'Resala' was accessible for me during college when I used to live in 'Beni – Suef' governorate. Salwa adds that 'Resala' is also available in her hometown of Menya but it is far away from where she lives. Salwa adds that when she used to work in 'Resala' she used to help a group of blind people. She dedicated herself once a week to sit down and read them a book while they sat down and thought it through. Other activities that 'Resala' offered while Salwa helped there was the process of collecting old or used clothes and washing them and preparing them, then distributing them to the most needy. Salwa dictates that helping out in 'Resala' created a sense of responsibility and self-worth for Salwa. After finishing college, Salwa wanted to actually work and stopped approaching charity organizations where she used to help out. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Egypt: Narrative Interview 4, 2–3)

Several young Egyptian respondents mentioned Resala as the organisation in which they had volunteered at some point of their lives. It was established long before the 2011 uprising, and represents one of the major youth-led civil society organisations in Egypt. Although its members may have personal affiliations or sympathies with diverse more politically oriented groups, since its inception it has been adamant about not involving itself in public political affairs and focused on service delivery, student activities on university campuses, and so on (Lei Sparre 2013). On the other hand, Salwa's decision to quit her voluntary activities after graduation is indicative of the wider phenomenon whereby youth transitions and ruptures in life courses may shape their opportunities and willingness to engage in public life more generally. This is central to the dynamics of engagement among youth in Arab Mediterranean countries. Unless voluntary, or practically unpaid, work supports their future life trajectories in the form of job opportunities, young people seldom have time for it, even if they would like to. It draws close to what Florence Passy and Marco Giugni (2000) suggest: the tensions and synergies between different spheres of everyday life – such as family, friends, studies, and employment – necessitate constant consideration as to how youth can negotiate their public commitments and activities in the making of their personal and collective futures (Onodera 2015). In general, those young people who are able to combine their philanthropic engagements and political commitments with other exigencies of everyday life are able to engage in public engagements more easily than others. Having a job in

a civil society organisation, for instance, eases the tensions between activism and earning a living. In this way, some are able to combine political involvement – following the news, participating in seminars and online discussions – with their everyday life. The insight provided by this notion of life spheres is helpful to analytically approach the fact that although manifest political participation has waned by the mid-2010s, it does not mean that youth are inactive in other areas of life that are of more urgent concern for their present lives and future life chances.

On the prospects of politicisation

Young people's negative attitudes toward, and disengagement from, sectoral politics raises the question of their politicisation. To what extent can the refusal to take part in public political life be seen as politicised agency? The notion of politicisation naturally lends itself to multiple meanings; here it implies a rather extensive definition that envisions the individual and collective acquisition of theoretical and practical knowledge of current affairs, and the willingness to use this knowledge as a resource to formulate certain attitudes for changing the status quo in public life. This view implies acknowledging the processes and circumstances in which young people are prone to connect their aspect of political relevance to concrete action.

This analytical approach is inspired by William Gamson (1992) who distinguishes between three interconnected sequences in the processes of politicisation. According to him, people first conceive a moral indignation in front of a given experience. Then, they construct a collective perception of this problem. Finally, they acquire the willingness to act on it. Gamson coins these, respectively, as the injustice frame, identity frame, and agency frame. Activated together, they are also constitutive of a process of 'desingularization' (Eliasoph 1998): the construction of a 'we' among persons who share an understanding of how a specific experience reflects a wider division of power within society. As such, according to Gamson, politicisation affects individuals, inciting them to act in a more or less organised way so as to enforce their experiences and visions of 'living together'. Gamson's approach is useful in breaking down the notion of politicisation into a set of distinctive and identifiable processes. Considering the occurrences of injustice, identity and agency frames in the testimonies of the youth hence enables to track the imprints of politicisation and eventually requalify some of their attitudes politicised, or at least, carrying the potential for politicisation. In this context, the young respondents' shared sense of the lack of future prospects is especially pronounced and carries the view that their life chances are sanctioned by the ruling classes of elder generations. They express difficulties in making the aspired transitions to adulthood due to the conditions imposed on them by the wider social, economic and political processes. However, these youth

grievances seldom materialise into protracted collective actions (SAHWA Youth Survey 2016).

For example, it has been suggested that low voter turnout rates among young people might be a result of active criticism towards the existing political system. Rather than merely pointing to youth's disengagement, they point towards a lack of effective participation and the difficulties young people have influencing the course of public affairs in their countries. In this light, active disengagement materialises in an apparent contradiction between politicisation and low electoral participation, and is nourished by the dialectics of trust and distrust (Cammaerts et al. 2014). As noted above, our material clearly indicates that young respondents cultivate predominantly negative perceptions and attitudes towards sectoral politics and formal political organisations. In Lebanon, the survey data shows that 62% of respondents express no confidence at all in the parliament or politicians, and 53.8% in political parties (SAHWA Youth Survey 2016). For instance, Walid, a young university student in Beirut, regards public political life as a highly distant sphere that seems unappealing for a variety of reasons:

... so if you want to talk about improving life in this country ... if you want to talk about happiness and what makes a person happy here in Lebanon ... you need a system that encourages hope and faith in the (political system) and one that rewards that (not like here in Lebanon) or it isn't going to work ... there is instead despair ... the kind of society that comes from this current regime is one that naturalises religious sectarianism (or it is natural for this system to impose religious sectarianism on people) and that you become an obeying sheep (goat) to the political *zaim* (leader) ... and you can't get work in what you do because it goes to those employers who have *wasta* ... and this is what brings despair and discontent. So if you do enter into the political system (and the government) then (in order to survive) you have to be the person who is sawing ... and you have to exploit others and not the other way round. You have to try to be the one in control ... if you enter into the system. I don't want to be part of this system ... I don't want to exploit others because this will drive me to the ground (I can't do it). (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Lebanon: Life Story 1, 13)

Walid's views are indicative of the personal and collective preferences for disengaging from sectoral politics and its practices among young people. Their choices are connected to a gradual loss of confidence in public authorities and a shared disillusionment as regards tangible reforms in the future. His views resemble those of Yacine, a young Moroccan who has never participated in elections during his lifetime:

From his point of view the elected representatives only fulfil their own interests: 'Some vote, but personally I don't vote. The president [of the Government of the Kingdom of Morocco] is aware of the various problems that we have related to sanitation and waste disposal, yet he doesn't do anything.' About the uprising in 2011 'Yacine' explains that there were some protests organised in Fes, but not in

Ain Taoujdate. People went to the street to protest against the setting up of a factory but 'nothing changed'. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Morocco: Life Story 2, 5)

Although Yacine's reflections prioritise the issues of daily subsistence and livelihood over political participation, they nonetheless reflect political awareness. Indeed, socioeconomic demands and political grievances are often intertwined. In the lives of young people, these are frequently connected to the immediate concerns of finding suitable jobs. Several respondents consider the educational qualifications as largely inconsequential for pursuing their career aspirations, although for men it is often a prerequisite for being eligible for marriage. Pursuing a university degree is in this context little more than a social obligation, and it does not secure one's job prospects or future career. This situation partly results from the mismatch between the available curricula in higher education and the needs of today's labour market, especially in the formal private sector (Honwana 2012). In addition, several respondents claim that employers demand previous work experience which is a challenging requirement for fresh university graduates (see also: Ahad and Tzannatos 2016).

Moreover, bemoaned by many, securing a suitable job (or any job, for that matter) often requires 'right' social connections, or *wasta*, which was seen by many to promote nepotistic recruitment practices at the expense of personal merits and skills:

You graduate from university, then *wasta* (connections) to find a job—and you have to if you want enter in the work you want and do the speciality you want, then you need to have a base ... so if you want to become an engineer then you need to have the training from an engineer and so on and forth ... but you also need connections. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Lebanon: Focus Group 1, 13)

According to SAHWA Youth Survey 2016, 96% of the young Lebanese respondents denounce the corruption and nepotism that occur in their country. While such expressions of felt injustice are recurrent in the material, the question of *wasta* also seems to nourish the construction of a youth identity frame. In the context of political and societal orders governed by clientelism and dominated by elder men, most youth complain of being disconnected from the processes of decision-making that affect their future lives. Such senses of alienation do not encourage engagement in public affairs, including its alternative forms as the survey data indicate – between 80% and 90% of the Lebanese respondents say they have never participated in any associative activities, demonstrations or strikes (SAHWA Survey – Lebanon, 67). More generally, the majority – lowest in Morocco (84.2%) and highest in Egypt (96.5%) – has not belonged to any political party, while the respective numbers for those never belonged to a political movement range between 85.1%

(Morocco) and 98.1% (Egypt). While these numbers are not globally exceptional, the restricted spaces of expressing discontent and extremely low levels of trust in the capacity of change are prone to sustain active forms of disengagement and shared perceptions of injustice that, beyond the appearance of stability, may result in eruptions of intense mobilisation at regular interval.

For instance, the *You Stink!* – movement stirred alternative dynamism in Lebanon's public life over the summer 2015 (BP Lebanon 2016). The neglect of garbage collection led to the movement's escalation as rubbish piled up and encroached on the streets in several municipalities. Driven predominantly by young Beirutis (Abi Yaghi, Catusse, and Younes 2016), the movement gained support from various strata of the population, cutting across communal and geographical divisions that normally hinder cooperation in building effective public campaigns. As the movement grew so did its demands, from the mundane issues of rubbish on the streets to encompass several charges against public authorities, the latter's corrupt practices and mismanagement of public funds, as well as the wider shortcomings of the sectarian political system (Abi Yaghi, Catusse, and Younes 2016). The tension rapidly rose as the youth took the streets and the movement escalated in riots opposing young demonstrators and security forces in downtown Beirut, around the national Parliament. In spite of the relative decline of the movement, the images of young people attacking both verbally and physically the established political order and traditional leaders were symbolic of the strength of sense of injustice experienced by them. The episode also demonstrated the relative as well as the explosive nature of youth disengagement. Starting from environmental concerns, the crisis rapidly translated into explicitly political demands that erupted into an outburst of violence. The movement took the question of garbage management in the streets of Beirut as 'an alternative political space' and was hence in position to 'expand the boundaries of the political' (Melucci and Avritzer 2000, 509). Despite its ultimately limited outcomes, *You Stink!* spurred a number of youth-led grass-roots movements and NGOs that address the renovation of the political order more explicitly. Among them are the collectives 'Badna Nhasib' (We want accountability) or 'Nahnoo' (We) (BP Lebanon 2016). Promoting a secular vision of Lebanon, these gatherings seek to encourage the emergence of genuine public spaces in a country where powerful political parties and private economic actors maintain their domination over physical as well as symbolic spaces. Their strategies are to confront public authorities to force them into engaging with issues that affect the lives of young people. Yet, these campaigns are still impeded by the coalition of the political establishment and their capacity to mobilise rises and falls according to the contexts.

As the above Lebanese cases indicate, processes of youth politicisation are rarely linear but, rather, they fluctuate (Lefort 2016, 13). Indeed, to use Gamson's terminology, the sequence of the three frames cannot be assumed and rarely do they coalesce in the form of fully fledged mobilisation. At times youth groups and nascent movements may denounce an injustice without translating it into the perception of a shared identity. In such cases, differences by social class, sect or religion and political affiliation or ideology may become more pertinent and divisive issues. Likewise, others may identify themselves with a collective cause or, even, generational location but these conceptions may not materialise into collective actions. The differences in strategic thinking and aspired outcomes may come to prevent protracted collective actions. In other words, the activation of the injustice, identity, and agency frames is largely dependent on the wider social, economic and political processes that shape the prospects of public mobilisation. Processes of politicisation thus always encompass potential limits, ruptures and reconfigurations, not least due to the outside constraint from legislation, public authorities, security services and political patronage. Individuals may be temporarily politicised and then depoliticised due to circumstances, but their social networks and shared experiences may live through the periods of demobilisation, too, through what Verta Taylor (1989) calls 'abeyance networks' that can be activated when opportunities arise. In this light, youth-based collectivities may sustain through shared lifestyles as well as informal friendship groups, and as 'hidden networks of groups, meeting points, circuits of solidarity which differ profoundly from the image of the politically organized actor' (Melucci 1996, 115; see also: Onodera 2018). Thus the protracted and collective forms of active disengagement within society can contain rather explosive potential. This characteristic sheds a particular light on the events of the Arab Spring themselves. The seemingly mundane issues, such as the way the police deals with unlicensed fruit sellers may rapidly gain aspects of wider political discontent, and channel a number of other grievances, as what happened in Tunisia in December 2010.

Thus, although the mid-2010s can be characterised as a period of relative stability and lack of political upheaval, the events of the 2011 uprisings have played a big part in forging new alliances and submerged networks that could be politicised in the aftermath. The revolutionary claims for 'bread, freedom, and social justice' and 'dignity' provide central discursive frames that have shaped consequent processes of politicisation too. In Tunisia and Egypt, especially, the claims of ownership of the revolution by the Islamist and secular-nationalist segments of the population have produced particular turbulence. For example, as reported by the SAHWA Project team from the American University of Cairo, the youth-led Tamarod (Revolt) movement played important roles in opposing the rule of President Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, collecting over 22 million signatures –

roughly a quarter of Egypt's population – for a petition demanding his resignation and new presidential elections. The main demands of the petition addressed the dire economic conditions and better living conditions for the poor, the restoration of security after series of clashes between protesters and the public authorities, and bringing justice for the people killed by the police during and after the mass uprisings in 2011. Morsi's presidency was brought down in cooperation with the military, leading to violent clashes and the suppression of pro-Morsi protests, with each camp blaming the other for monopolising their share of the 2011 revolution. The polarisation of public opinion that ensued, coupled with new restrictions on street protesting and associational life, and the internally waged 'war against terror' against armed Islamist militants have not been inconsequential for the prospects of politicisation among the youth ever since. In a focus group discussion, some participants in political and awareness-raising campaigning since 2011 indicated that there are renewed risks in engaging in manifest political activities:

Many believe that there is a depression state, or a stagnation state of political participation amongst themselves and youth in general, they do not believe that there is complete freedom of speech as there is some fear of saying their own opinions. However they agreed that the danger is not on all Egyptian youth but certain influential ones. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Egypt: Focus Group 3, 6).

Livelihood considerations

Levels of repression and impunity, social instability and economic hardships have an obvious impact on young people's ways of living out their engagements. Public contestation represents a risk for individuals as well all collective actors, especially in the post-2011 era in which several associations have been publicly charged for conspiring with outside agencies. In their study of politicisation in Morocco, Frederic Vairel and Lamia Zaki (2011, 104) have demonstrated that many civil society actors opt for non-confrontational strategies as a way to avoid political pressure from the authorities (see also: Abdou and Skalli 2018). In addition, not all individuals benefit from the same opportunities. Structural and cultural obstacles to political participation are more pronounced among young women. Similarly, young people's background in terms of household, socioeconomic status, and educational levels continues to be a major factor in determining the levels of civic participation among youth in the region (OECD 2015, 50; Colombo 2016, 15). It is also clear from the SAHWA Youth Survey that the most immediate concerns of young people do not revolve around political reform but problems closer to home – the 'bread and butter' issues that are most pressing for their present lives and future life chances. In the five national survey studies, the majority of

young respondents regarded 'the economic situation', 'people's standard of living' and 'jobs' as the biggest problems in their countries.³ Out of 13 alternatives, these three answers amounted to 74% in Egypt, 65% in Tunisia, 55% in Algeria and Lebanon, and 46% in Morocco (Maiche et al. 2017). The issues of unemployment and nepotistic recruitment practices, especially, are seen as a collective problem in all five countries, suggesting that the socioeconomic injustice frame has not withered away in the aftermath of the 2011 uprisings. Youth unemployment runs high in all five countries, pushing many to unstable jobs in informal economies with little job security or social benefits, and to precarious living conditions. A focus group discussion in Morocco raised the view that:

The fact of being within the underground economy is in itself a protest against the state and various socioeconomic actors, supposed to fight against poverty, not leave citizens fight individually for solutions by themselves. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Morocco: Focus Group 4, 7).

In the post-2011 era, young people are, as Hassan and Dyer (2017, 10) argue, 'a tremendous source for creativity, innovation, and hard work' and 'the promise of a better future for the region as a whole'. Addressing their main concerns – including their economic situation, standard of living, and employment – remains central to the popular legitimacy of public authorities for years to come, since economic strains nourish moral indignation as well as necessities to act. They participate in a 'politicization of the constraints' (Vairel and Zaki 2011, 92) that pushes young people to look for alternative solutions to make their living and voice their indignation when state institutions are losing their credibility. Such forms of resistance are more than ever present today while the repercussions of the global financial (and food) crisis of the late 2000s continues, but now coupled with further political instability, securitisation of public space and added uncertainties.

In the post-2011 era, sometimes the seemingly non-political things – such as having a job – gain new political aspects due to societal events and the rapid shifts in public debates. Salma, a 25-year-old craftswoman living in Tunisia, explains that even her profession has recently become a contested issue. Working in craftsmanship and thus following the vocation of both her parents, her livelihood would not be conventionally seen as politicised. In unstable conditions, however, it forces new considerations on her about her livelihood as well as the role of her vocational choice in the building of the post-Ben Ali society today:

She is concerned with the political situation in the country. Since revolution, she actively watches television programs and debates about current news. She is aware that her professional activity has a tight relation with the country political stability. Suppliers, she says, clients and tourists depend on security in the country. Her activity being related to women, art and decoration could be

negatively perceived by several stubborn extremists. Thus, she thinks that she could be a target of their wrath one day. From her point-of view violence in general and terrorism in particular represent the main threats facing the country. After the revolution, violence, obscenities and the lack of civism have become generalized and common everywhere. Many times, she has been victim of that. She feels she lives in insecurity. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Tunisia: Focused Ethnography 3, 7–8)

Ultimately, in the aftermath of terrorist attacks in Tunisia, Salma hoped to emigrate abroad due to the worsening life chances she saw in post-revolutionary Tunisia. In comparison with most of her peers, she enjoyed a privileged position due to an opportunity to relocate to Canada with her husband, despite her reluctance to leave her home and family far behind. The sense of insecurity – coupled here with the longing for migration – that surfaces clearly in our data brings an added dimension to the lives of today's youth that shapes their experience of engaging with their current and future lives. For some, the goal of migrating and working abroad is more directly linked to their life chances, especially for men so that they can save for the costs of marriage or to support their family back home.

In the past, I didn't like to think a lot about leaving ... I love my country and being around and caring for my family ... at the same time the way this country going in terms of society and the psychology of this country ... well of course one starts to think of leaving ... (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Lebanon: Life Story 3, 15)

In the qualitative data, the large majority of youth wish to migrate abroad for work, mainly to the Persian Gulf, Europe and North America. At the same time, some would like to build their lives closer to home and to contribute their productive forces to the building of the new economy. In a focus group discussion in Alexandria, Egypt, the national research team observes that after a debate on migration:

... a lot started discussing the idea of nationalism and the sense of belongingness to the country, and the idea of being responsible of improving the country. Overall, most of the participants believed that migrating or completely leaving the country would not do any good neither to the person nor the country. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Egypt: Focus Group 4, 8)

In this light, the aspirations of leaving or staying connect individual life courses to wider societal processes in the post-2011 context, although most would not want to leave their families behind. The main push factor is connected to the challenges of gaining a livelihood while the issues of public engagement do not rate as so high a concern. It remains true that while for some, like Salma, craftsmanship and artistic expression are directly linked to their vocation and livelihood, for others they are also a question of mediating alternative views in public life. As for the latter prospect in Tunisia, there have

been new youth initiatives to provide new opportunities for young artists in the post-Ben Ali era. One such initiative is called 'Artist despite myself', which promotes the view that art is both a space for expression and a bridge for communication and dialogue in society, thus holding onto the expression that art is 'a space of inclusion and acceptance and not a space of exclusion' that had already emerged before 2011 (BP Tunisia 2016). In this way, groups of young Tunisians have introduced new practices of mediation and participatory politics, while contributing to public life with added criticism and acts of citizenship. This can be seen as an extension of a wider phenomenon in Tunisia, Egypt and other countries too, where young people have created new genres of music and 'street art' – graffiti, performances and the like – to express their dissent, while trying to keep away from the political authorities (see also: Laine, Suurpää, and Ltifi 2018).

In such contexts, civil society actors may play a role in encouraging alternative modes of engagement that are not necessarily framed as explicitly political. As Nina Eliasoph has shown in a different context, civil society movements often present themselves as 'avoiding politics' (1998), hence carrying a normative distinction between civil society and public political actors. The former being seen as a positive alternative to the latter, envisioned negatively due to corruption, inefficiency, and authoritarian forms of governance. This kind of distinction between civil society formations and sectoral politics prevails in our material. We should, however, remain critical of this distinction in Algeria, Egypt, Lebanon, Morocco and Tunisia, as, elsewhere, civil society actors can also be connected in many ways to political elites, state-level bureaucracies, businesses, important public figures, and different forms of institutional backing. Moreover, civil society initiatives can also be considered negatively by the young, whose distrust encompasses not only governmental institutions and political parties, but civil society associations, too. Views from a focus group discussion in Algeria are illustrative in this respect:

It is as true as the Algerian young people are very weakly structured in non-governmental organizations. It shows that the scale of the lack of confidence which exceeds the governmental organizations or the political parties: 'the young people can also have a bad experience when they are mobilized in collective actions with the organizations of the civil society. When the young person does voluntary work and he notices a mismanagement, he will have a bad idea on these organizations. Thus there will be a reliable break'. This other declaration asserts the break of the confidence between the young people and the political world: 'at the beginning of the political experience in Algeria he trusted there. But after the events the young people divided. The majority lost confidence, the others adopted the politics as the way of upward social ascent'. (SAHWA Ethnographic Fieldwork 2015, Algeria: Focus Group 9, 11)

Ultimately, for the large majority of youth, resolving the tensions between livelihood and public engagement is not an alternative. Yet, although the

youth survey suggests high levels of disengagement, the qualitative materials – many of which were collected under the auspices of local associations – provide a nuanced picture. In this context, civic engagement is mainly framed in terms of community development, tangible aid to poor families (including clothes, food and monthly allowance) or vulnerable people (e.g. orphans), and financial help to get married. The focus group discussions on civic participation were in general divided into views that emphasised either the individual's role and responsibility as a member of the family, neighbourhood and society, or the role of civic associations in service delivery. In Egypt, some respondents regard NGOs as important in terms of offering services that are not done by the government, and also identified NGOs as platforms to engage in aspect politics, including awareness-raising campaigns. On the contrary, others would declare themselves not interested at all in politics, and that civic associations should not be involved in sectoral politics. Overall, both quantitative and qualitative data underline the ambivalent potential of young people's politicisation. While active disengagement seems to prevail in the mid-2010s, it does not exclude alternative forms and repertoires of engagement. In restricted political settings, the seemingly non-political aspects of everyday life – such as environmental concerns in Lebanon – may rapidly be articulated to wider political demands, while obstacles to formal political participation sustain alternative tactics of political expression, such as new forms of 'street art' in Tunisia and elsewhere. This illuminates Rhys Farthing's (2010) statement that 'young people are simultaneously disengaged and engaged' by which he draws attention to their disengagement from the established forms of sectoral politics and their reflections on aspect politics through the exploration of new agoras to influence their social surroundings. It remains the case that the young respondents are faced with the situation in which their autonomous efforts of mobilisation are ever more challenging and volatile.

Concluding remarks

In this article, we have examined the dynamics of engagement among young people in five Arab Mediterranean countries. While the so-called Arab Spring witnessed a high peak of youth mobilisation in the early 2010s, the appearance of today's political demobilisation among young people is connected to several coinciding issues. The widespread lack of trust in political institutions, coupled with economic hardship and the rise of insecurity and political violence have resulted in increasingly cautious attitudes among young people toward public political engagements. However, in many respects, this trend yields complex and often contradictory dynamics. As we have pointed out, the appearance of politically demobilised young people does not imply that they lack opinions on current affairs: many choose to disengage from public political

life due to the risks involved or the disillusionment with the unfulfilled revolutionary or reformist processes. Also, although the high levels of unemployment may promote the stereotypical imagery of 'apathetic' or 'idle' youth, it does not necessarily tell us much about their aspirations to work hard, nor of political views, or their willingness to act when opportunities arise.

Reflecting on the great diversity of life experiences both between and within the five countries under review, we have also attempted to make justice to the plurality and heterogeneity of the so-called Arab youth. Nonetheless, it remains that a sociological reading of what being young may mean in these five countries reveal a series of meaningful similarities, in particular in terms of (dis)engagement. Overall, it seems that the 2010s has witnessed a collective movement from public engagements to more personal politics around life aspirations. In this context, we argue for the importance of paying attention to the agentic dimensions of youth disengagement as a collective phenomenon. Rather than reinforcing yet another set of rigid dualisms – such as passive and active disengagement – it is important to pay attention to specific moments in the life course and young people's gendered trajectories in multiple spheres of everyday life that are helpful in conceiving the matters of politicisation and political engagement as dynamic processes. Young respondents discussed in this article have in the main refocused their daily efforts on issues that have direct relevance to their present lives and future life chances. In other words, given that the prospects of influencing the sphere of sectoral politics seem blocked, the personal and collective quests of education, employment, and eventually marriage are for them much more relevant and existential.

In the turbulent 2010s, these youth transitions remain highly precarious and uncertain in comparison with the life experience of the earlier generations. Indeed, today's youth, who in the main grew up under longstanding and authoritarian regimes, share the formative experiences of revolutionary hope for systemic change, and consequent disillusionment. The low levels of trust in sectoral politics and its institutions hardly concern youth alone but, in comparison to their elders, young people's hopes and reflections on what life has to offer are by necessity oriented toward the future; their adult lives with new sets of roles and responsibilities are in many ways yet to begin. The more their efforts prove to be in vain in the multiple spheres of life and aspiration, the more it aggregates discontent and felt injustices among them, thus lowering the threshold for politicisation processes in the long run. In this respect, the socioeconomic policy initiatives on affordable housing, educational reform and job creation, that aim at more equitable share of national resources, remain crucial processes for years to come. At the same time, these should be implemented in parallel with other initiatives that result in wider youth experiences of being genuinely included in decision-making processes that result in tangible changes in their everyday lives.

Notes

1. We are greatly indebted to the expertise of Martta Myllylä from the Finnish Youth Research Network when analysing the quantitative data.
2. According to the SAHWA Youth Survey, some 13% of young respondents in Lebanon had participated in two (out of six) public activities during the past 12 months. The proportions in in Egypt were 3% and in Tunisia 5%, respectively (Laine et al. 2016, 12–14).
3. These three answers were chosen out of 13 options. The other options were: Terrorism; Education; Democracy and human rights; The increasing influence of religion over government; The health system; Corruption; Morals in society; Housing; Criminality and drugs; Other (please specify).

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